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Politics – once again – threaten to mar census

It may seem like a simple operation - count the numbers of people in the country so that the 435 members of the U. S. Congress may represent equal numbers of persons throughout the nation, but what should be a simple matter of number crunching has turned into a political quagmire.

Just this past month House Speaker Newt Gingrich has filed a lawsuit to prevent the Clinton administration from using statistical sampling to get a better count of the population in order that Congressional reapportionment and state and local redistricting more accurately reflect numbers of persons. The basis for this lawsuit hinges on the constitutional mandate that population be an "actual enumeration" count.

And the recent resignation of Martha Farnsworth Riche as Director of the Census, according to colleagues, results from her continuing frustration over the past two years of her tenure with Republican leaders who want an actual count of the population rather than the sampling method that she espoused.

Further adding to the frustration is the attempt to contain costs in the year 2000 of what was, in 1990, the most expensive census count in the 200 year history of decennial census enumerations. The four year effort of the Office of Management and Budget to clarify race and ethnic-origin standards used for government data has also been a problem requiring, delicate handling.

The racial and ethnic questions have recently been addressed. OMB has just accepted the recommendations of the Federal Interagency Committee, a more than 30 member group formed in 1994 to study the question to have a multiple race response rather than a single multiracial category. Re-

spondents can select up to five racial categories rather than just one of those used in 1990. The five categories are: White; Black or African-American; American Indian or Alaska Native; Asian; and Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander.

One way to address the cost issue is to reduce the number of questions asked. The short form will consist of only seven questions, six on population and one on housing. This questionnaire will be the shortest form used in the last 180 years. The one in six households to receive the long form will have an additional 27 questions, or a total of 34.

The cost of the 1990 census amounted to \$25 per household; this compared to a \$10 per household cost, measured in 1990 dollars, in 1970. And yet congressional critics say they are willing to fund an additional \$800 million over the billion dollars already budgeted for 2000 in order to count the population in the traditional manner. But the Census Bureau claims it can be done cheaper and more accurately by using sampling for the population not found.

The 1990 census was expensive because too many persons did not return their questionnaires and thus had to be searched out, and this proved to be very costly and often unsuccessful. Sampling of this population would, according to the Census Bureau, give greater accuracy as well as being less expensive.

Sampling, of course, is a recognized statistical measure of a population. Whether one measures unemployment, income, poverty or the President's popularity, statistical sampling is the technique used.

The two Congressional criticisms of the 1990 census were excessive cost and missing too many people. It is estimated that 10 million persons were not counted while 6 million were double counted resulting in an undercount of 4 million. Most of this undercount took place in urban areas where minorities are concentrated. It is estimated that 5 percent of all Hispanics and over 4 percent of all Blacks were not counted. Sampling would likely reduce this undercount of potential voters for the Democratic Party, a point not favored by the Republicans.

Referring to sampling, this is what a

National Academy of Sciences Congressionally mandated committee said in 1994. Their words: "It is fruitless to continue trying to count every last person with traditional census methods...it is possible to improve the accuracy of the census count...with statistical estimates of the number and characteristics of those not directly enumerated." Two years later a second panel reaffirmed these findings.

This attempt at the national level to seek political advantage by the method used to count persons can also translate to shifting these numbers in such a way as to gain advantage at the state and local levels. This is what happened in Rhode Island's state senate as well as city and town councils of Providence and Johnston after the 1980 census. Population enumerations at all governmental levels can have an impact on all of us and bear close watching. □

Chester E. Smolski, Professor Emeritus of Geography at Rhode Island College, writes occasionally for this newspaper.

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